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African exports during the colonial era

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African economies shifted to single-commodity export systems in order to provide European markets with raw goods. The negative effects of these policies are still felt today. Prior to colonization there was vibrant trade between different parts of Africa—West Africa, the Swahili Coast, the Nile River Valley—and other parts of the world. Goods exported to the benefit of traders and coastal African states included grains, crops, wood products, oils, minerals, cloth, leather, and iron products. The arrival of colonial interests, however, changed the terms of trade.

Colonial states were required to seek economic self-sufficiency while providing cheap sources of raw goods to drive European markets. This led to one of the fundamental shifts in Africa during the colonial era—the focus on an export-driven economy. Economies that once were diversified were transformed into mono-mineral or mono-crop economies producing in large quantity that which they could best export to Europe. This process resulted in high economic volatility and an increased dependency of African economies on European markets.

For example, cotton was grown in Nigeria as early as the 15th century by farmers on small, mixed plots. In 1902 the British government began encouraging greater cotton production in Nigeria in an effort to reduce British reliance on cotton sources in the United States. By 1905 Nigeria was producing large amounts of cotton for the British market, and demand only increased with the onset of World War I (1914–18). By the 1920s cotton was the dominant Nigerian export, with 70 percent of all Nigerian cotton going to the United Kingdom. In spite of Nigeria's production, with the onset of World War II (1939–45) British-American ties were strengthened, and the need for Nigerian cotton was significantly reduced. As a result the price of Nigerian cotton collapsed, and the Nigerian export economy, so dependent on cotton, was severely damaged.

In the postwar period Britain made significant attempts to increase Nigerian cotton production—and, therefore, prices—but these efforts failed. The export promotion was driven by the United Kingdom's postwar crisis, not Nigerian economic need. In the end the United Kingdom was unable to revive the Nigerian cotton industry that it had created and then allowed to collapse.

Similar export schemes, such as Portuguese cultivation of cotton in Angola and Mozambique, French promotion of groundnuts (peanuts) in Senegal and rice in Madagascar, and British promotion of coffee and tea in Kenya and Uganda all led to similar economic dependencies and volatilities. Perhaps the greatest long-term impact of these export economies was the introduction of mining in southern Central Africa. The development of the copperbelt, which extended from Katanga, in what was the Belgian Congo, into the British colony of Northern Rhodesia (present-day Zambia), was especially important.

Some scholars argue that by extracting surplus goods, rather than investing them in development, European powers propelled their own economies forward while stifling African countries and reducing their potential for growth. Other scholars argue that this process linked hitherto independent African economies to the great potential of the global economy. Regardless, the impact of single-commodity export systems created during the colonial era is still felt today as

countries struggle to retool their economies.



Further Information

Peter Duignana and L. H. Gann, *Colonialism in Africa 1870–1960: Vol. 4, The Economics of Colonialism* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975)

John R. Hanson, *Trade in Transition: Exports from the Third World, 1840–1900* (New York: Academic Press, 1980).



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